

BYU Student Helps Guatemalan Teachers Move Into the Information Age

Brigham Young University senior, Richard Culatta, has been helping teachers in Guatemala incorporate computer technology into their classrooms. The Instructional Psychology and Technology student has traveled to Central America twice this year to meet with grammar school teachers and help them use the technology to broaden their students' educational horizon.

The project is supported by the Rose Educational Foundation, BYU's College of Education and the Office of Research and Creative Activities.

Culatta began his education in instructional technology at the University of Rhode Island before transferring to BYU. "I liked playing with computers," he says, "and that was when technology was first starting to merge with education; teachers were first starting to get computers." While at URI he got involved with workshops teaching professors about the electronic side of education.



Culatta—an undergraduate—consults, teaches and does research at BYU.

Shortly after arriving at BYU Culatta began working at the university's Center for Instructional Design. In that capacity he was able to teach faculty members how to use the latest computer technology and teach an IT course to students. Now, he works as a technology consultant for the McKay School of Education, continuing to assist professors on enhancing their instruction with the use of the applied science.

"I got to see what a great change technology could have on education, he says of his experiences. When technology is used effectively it can be a window that leads outside of the traditional four walls of the classroom." He points out that without computer technology classrooms today starkly resemble those of 30 years ago. But with the technology the boundaries of where teachers and students can go are limitless. "If you are studying art you have a tool that will put you inside the museums. If you are studying science you have a tool that will give you the simulation you need right there, and that's a big, big difference."

He adds that this new medium also allows teachers to communicate with each other and share resources to improve education like never before.

Last winter Culatta visited several schools in the Guatemalan towns of Chimaltenango, Momostenango and Patzicia. There he worked with teachers who had little or no

computer experience. During his second visit, Culatta participated in a workshop; answering teachers' questions and helping them effectively use their new tools to educate.

Along with instructing, the undergraduate conducted a survey asking Guatemalan teachers about their computer skills and what they have learned since using them. Culatta wants to eliminate future obstacles in integrating technology, no matter where the schools may be.

Culatta's mentor, professor Charles Graham, helped him create the survey. They first met when Graham supervised an IT course Culatta was teaching. Their work together on the class spread to their cooperative effort on the research project. "I was lucky to have an excellent mentor," Culatta says. "He does a very good job of being able to look at some things and say, 'These are things that I don't think are necessarily going to work right,' but then still letting me go and find the solutions. He's there to provide the help, not just the answers."

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One of the favorable things about relocating to BYU from back east, where research schools dominate, is the level of undergraduate research he couldn't find anywhere else. "One of the things that separates BYU from other institutions I've seen or known is the fact that students graduate from here not only with the coursework but having the experience of actually participating in the discipline, whatever it is. And that's the huge advantage."

That advantage has helped him get into BYU's graduate program in Informational Psychology and Technology. "When I do start the Masters program I'm already going to have experience going through the whole process of research and writing the paper and having a finished product," he says. "There will be lots to learn but at least I'll know the process."

After he finishes the Masters program Culatta wants to work in curriculum design. With the rise of technology Culatta sees it becoming a natural part of the classroom and the teaching curriculum. But he says it has to be integrated more thoroughly. "It can't be a separate subject, where you're just learning to use technology. It's got to be the tool that's being used in order to teach Math or Science." He also believes that students need to be placed in the driver's seat, taking more responsibility for their education, and technology will allow them to do so.

Moreover, Culatta points out that merely having technology in the classroom doesn't necessarily lead to improved education. Rather, it's how one uses the technology during

class time that makes the difference in learning. He says a project, for example, can be divided amongst the students so that they do the work, build the final product and present its results (just like a mentored learning environment).

Culatta is grateful to BYU and ORCA for getting him, as he says, “in the loop of researching.” The experience has also spawned other ideas he feels would be beneficial for educational technology. Ideas he wants to pursue in graduate school and beyond.